

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Published on *The National Interest* (<http://nationalinterest.org/>)

Source URL (retrieved on Mar 18, 2014): <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/russia-would-lose-fair-crimea-vote-10054>

Russia Would Lose a Fair Crimea Vote

[Share on email](#) [Share on twitter](#) [Share on facebook](#) [Share on digg](#) | [More Sharing Services](#)^[1]

[John Herbst](#) ^[2]

|

March 15, 2014

[John Herbst](#) ^[2]



It is well understood in the West that the Russian invasion of Crimea is a violation of international law and of Russian commitments to Ukraine under the Budapest Memorandum and other agreements. It is also no secret that this unilateral effort to change by force internationally recognized borders is dangerous not just in Europe, but worldwide. Yet there seems to be no similar understanding about the damage that this step might do in Crimea itself. Indeed it is almost as if observers tacitly accept the Kremlin claim that the people on the peninsula would welcome independence from Ukraine, or annexation by Russia because a majority of the population is ethnic Russian. The distinguished University of Chicago Professor Eric Posner even wrote an [article](#) ^[3] somewhat defending Russian aggression on the peninsula on these grounds.

The only problem with this storyline is that it does not bear close analysis. There is no reason to expect that in a fair referendum, a majority of Crimeans will vote for independence. The last census taken in Ukraine in 2001 reported that ethnic Russians made up 58 percent of the Crimean population, Ukrainians 24 percent and Tatars 12 percent. In the previous, 1989 census, Russians comprised 67 percent of the population, Ukrainians 26 percent and Tatars 1.6 percent. The peninsula is the Crimean Tatars' ancestral home; they were forcibly expatriated from Crimea by Stalin during World War II and began to return to the peninsula in significant numbers after Ukraine became independent. Since 2001, this Tatar immigration has continued. That plus the Tatars' greater fertility (in contrast with the low fertility of Russians and Ukrainians) suggest that the Tatar portion of the population is higher than 12 percent today.

In December of 1991, Ukraine had a referendum on independence from the Soviet Union. Voter turnout was 76 percent, and 90 percent of the ballots were in favor of independence. According to the 1989 census, Russians constituted 22 percent of Ukraine's population and Ukrainians 73 percent. (In the 2001 census, the Russian population dropped to 17 percent and the Ukrainian population rose to 77.5 percent) The voting statistics for that referendum are broken down geographically, not by ethnic group. Still, in every oblast in the country, there was a majority for independence. Even in Crimea, with ethnic Russians comprising 67 percent of the population, 54 percent of the votes were for independence. At a minimum, a significant number of ethnic Russians in Crimea voted for Ukraine's independence, as they did countrywide.

There is little reason to think that this has changed, despite the massive propaganda in the Russian media, widely consumed

in Crimea, that a "fascist coup d'etat" in Kyiv threatens ethnic Russians and Russophones across the country. A poll taken on the peninsula shortly before the Russian invasion showed only 42 percent of the population favoring independence.

Commentators disposed to Kremlin claims on the affections of the Crimean population have not broached the highly irregular means by which the new ruling authorities were established—at the parliamentary building in the capital Simferopol surrounded by those unidentified, but clearly Red Army–looking soldiers. The man who emerged as Prime Minister, Sergei Aksyonov, is the head of a pro-Russian party that managed only 4 percent of the vote in last fall's election. This man, known as "the Goblin" from his alleged criminal days in the 1990s, is the face of self-determination in Crimea?

It is likely that, despite Russian media disinformation to the contrary, the Kremlin understands that there is no groundswell of support in Crimea for independence from Ukraine. That's why the "unidentified" troops have thus far blocked access to the peninsula to international observers and closed down Ukrainian media outlets. In response to growing European talk of sanctions, the Kremlin appears to have agreed March 13 to permit OSCE observers to enter Crimea. Whether or not that actually happens, Mr. Putin is doing his best to control the information coming out on the referendum, lest it spoil his story line.

As part of the Kremlin effort, the referendum ballot offers only two options. The first is to "rejoin" Russia. The second appears to restore ^[4] the Crimean constitution of 1992, which gives the area wide autonomy, including the right to develop relations with neighbors. This constitution, which could lead to an independent Crimea, was later annulled by the central government in Kyiv. It is significant that the ballot does not appear to include the possibility of maintaining the status quo.

That may explain why the Tatar community, representing something more than 12 percent of the Crimea's population and fiercely devoted to remaining citizens of Ukraine, has announced its intention to boycott the vote. The Tatars do not want to be part of a dubious process that reports a large majority "against" maintaining the status quo. They fear for their treatment as part of a Russian Crimea.

Ukrainians on the peninsula might also have something to fear. The new Information Minister of Crimea, Dmitri Polonsky, was asked about two missing leaders of the Ukrainian community on the peninsula. He explained that "there is no Ukrainian community in the Crimea, and so there are no missing community leaders." Nikolai Gogol would understand what is going on. So should real friends of democracy.

John Herbst is director of the Center for Complex Operations at the National Defense University. He served as U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine from 2003 to 2006. This piece represents the views of the author and not of the National Defense University.

Image: Wikimedia Commons/[Sonia Sevilla](#) ^[5]. CC BY-SA 3.0.

More by

[John Herbst](#) ^[2]

Topics: [Autocracy](#) ^[6] [Democracy](#) ^[7] [Society](#) ^[8]

Regions: [Russia](#) ^[9] [Ukraine](#) ^[10]

Source URL (retrieved on Mar 18, 2014): <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/russia-would-lose-fair-crimea-vote-10054>

Links:

[1] <http://www.addthis.com/bookmark.php?v=250&username=nationalinterest>

[2] <http://nationalinterest.org/profile/john-herbst>

[3]

http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/jurisprudence/2014/03/crimea_referendum_on_joining_russia_and_leaving_ukraine_underhanded_but.html

[4] <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/yes-crimeans-do-have-choice%E2%80%94good-one-10026>

[5] http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Voter_Cast_his_vote_in_ballot_box-_Iranian_presidential_election,_2013_in_Sarakh_3.jpeg

[6] <http://nationalinterest.org/topic/society/autocracy>

[7] <http://nationalinterest.org/topic/society/democracy>

[8] <http://nationalinterest.org/topic/society>

[9] <http://nationalinterest.org/region/eurasia/russia>

[10] <http://nationalinterest.org/region/europe/eastern-europe/ukraine>